The Folklore of the Lepidoptera

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The lepidoptera do not figure greatly in the folklore of the British Isles since it is only the most obvious species that attract attention and have traditions attached to them.

The majority of the beliefs relating to the Lepidoptera have their origin in the curious idea that the human soul takes on the form of a butterfly (or moth) after death. This belief is ancient and widespread and is to be found in many cultures. In Britain the further step was taken to equate differing types of butterfly or moth with the souls of different groups of people (e.g. *Vanessa atalanta* L. with Cardinals and large grey moths such as *Cerura vinula* L. with millers.).

The 'whites' have long been looked on as pest species and the advice given in one nineteenth century popular work on the insects to, 'teach children to destroy every white butterfly they see,' (1) was followed in many parts of the country. However, the whites were often given the name of unpopular groups of people and called 'enemies souls'. The only exception to this hatred of whites was to be found in Cambridgeshire where they were said to be the souls of young children (2) — to see one indicated that a child had just died (white has always, in Britain, symbolised innocence and purity). In Lincolnshire whites were called Frenchmen (3) whilst in Westmorland;

> "the white variety were called Papishes (Papists = Roman Catholics) and were hunted by gangs of boys on Oak Apple Day (May 29th); the variegated kind (perhaps *Aglais urticae* L.) were King George's Butterflies and were, technically at least, though not always actually, safe from destruction on that day." (4).

In Scotland *A. urticae* did not receive the partial protection afforded it in Westmorland for as Edward Newman records (5) it was called the 'Devil Butterfly' or the 'Witch Butterfly' and these were hunted and killed (6). However, in this case the insect was probably thought to be a witch who had transformed herself into the form of a butterfly, rather than that the butterfly was the witch's soul. The transformation of witches into animals (usually hares or cats) (7) is a common belief although stories of transformations into insects are very rare. I only know of one case, in which a seventeenth century Hertfordshire witch confessed that she had cut the thread of a spinning girl whilst she was in the form of a bee. (8) I know of no case in which a witch was claimed to have turned herself into a butterfly.

The Red admiral (*V. atalanta*) may once have had traditions associated specifically with it, since in Kent it was called the Cardinal (9), whilst the Rev. F. O. Morris (10) caled it the Alderman. Both Cardinals and Aldermen wear red robes and *V. atalanta* is the only British butterfly with

* Silver Crest, Silver Street, Sway, Lymington, Hants.

red on its wings. Both groups of people were unpopular; Cardinals since they were catholics and Aldermen are often represented in traditional tales and songs as fat, greedy and dishonest.

The magnificent Deaths Head Hawk (*Acherontia atropos* L.) has never been common enough in Britain to have become the harbinger of evil that it is in France, although individual specimens would be treated with superstitious horror when they were found as the Rev. J. G. Wood tells us (11);

'In a small village removed from the influence of the railways, (this was in 1870) on one Sunday morning, as the inhabitants were going through the churchyard, a Death's-Head Moth appeared on the path. Every one recoiled in dismay, and no one dared to approach the dreaded object. Sundry heads were shaken at the evil omen, and various prophetic remarks were made. At last, the blacksmith summoned up his courage, and with a great jump, came down on the unfortunate moth, and happily destroyed it. I have this specimen now in my possession; it is of course mashed quite flat.'

I rather suspect that many people finding one today would be terrified at its appearance though not to the extent of the villagers.

One curious tradition connected with this insect is that it first appeared in England after the execution of Charles 1 in 1649. One author even tells us that it was said, "that the Deaths-Head moth has been very common in Whitehall (!) since the execution of Charles 1." (12) This is one of the many beliefs that became associated with the execution of 'King Charles the Martyr' as he was termed (even in the Book of Common Prayer until 1860.).

In Yorkshire the Ghost Swift (*Hepialus humuli* L.) was called the 'Soul' and left strictly alone (13); this, and the present common name suggest traditions that seem to be lost.

The common name 'Miller', for *Acronicta leporina* L., embodies a widespread belief and custom. For many centuries millers have been held to be highly dishonest (see Chaucer's "The Reeves Tale"), and certain moths have been called 'millers'. This name has been applied to at least three species, *A. leporina, Dasychira pudibunda* L. and *Cerura vinula* L. all of which are dusty grey (just like a miller). On finding one of these moths a child (in Dorset) would chant;

"Millery, Millery, dusty poll,
How many sacks hast thee a-stole?
Four and twenty and a peck,
Hang the old miller up by the neck." (14)

— then kill it. This rhyme was to be found, with slight variations, in many southern counties.

Lepidoptera seen under unusual circumstances were often regarded as omens, although the interpretations could vary from place to place, thus three white butterflies seen together was an omen of ill fortune in Northamptonshire (15).

Finally there are the curious beliefs concerning the first butterfly seen in the year. In Gloucestershire it could foretell your success (or lack of it) in the coming year (17). If it was 'white' (probably *Gonepteryx rhamni* L.) the year would be good and you could afford to eat white bread. If it was 'brown', however, (*Inachis io* L. or *A. urticae*) you would have a bad year and be forced to eat brown bread.

The first butterfly was hunted and killed in Devon and Somerset, whilst in Wiltshire it was only the first white one that was killed. One lady, born in 1902, recalls that her mother pointed it out to her saying;

"That's the first butterfly, it's your enemy, so kill it". She then remembers chasing it around the garden trying to swat it (18). In Cornwall, however, the first butterfly killed each year brought bad luck to the killer (19). These stories are obviously related to the tradition of the butterfly as a human soul. The first butterfly is seen as the soul of an enemy which ought to be killed, although in Cornwall to kill it would probably offend the 'enemy' and so cause even more trouble, which is why it was left alone.

There are some traditions still current concerning lepidoptera — even amongst entomologists! For example I have been told that to see many *Polygonia c-album* L. in the spring fortells a good year for butterflies. (20).

Whilst many people are bemoaning the apparent decline in the butterfly population, it is very pleasant to find such a tradition still extant, and one wonders if other similar beliefs still survive?

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